Workplace Bullying: The Bully You Can't See

Most workplace bullying isn't obvious, but it's prevalent in today's workforce. Learn how you can help identify and prevent bullying in your organization.

Published May 23, 2018

Let me tell you about Kevin Morrissey. Kevin, a managing editor at *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, had received a scolding email from his boss, Ted Genoways, about his work. Kevin was already used to such messages; he'd been getting them almost daily, especially after he had questioned the publication's accounting practices. By the time Ted sent this latest email, which accused Kevin of engaging in "unacceptable workplace behavior" and instructed him to work from home, Kevin had already spiraled into depression. So when he received yet another missive from his boss 10 days later accusing him of mishandling an article source, Kevin had had enough. He quit his job – by quitting his life. Kevin committed suicide. Ted concedes that he was harsh with Kevin, but denies accusations of "bullycide."

You Know It When You See It?

Did Ted bully Kevin? The answer isn't obvious – because most workplace bullying isn't obvious. But it is prevalent, up to four times more common than sexual harassment. As a result, research shows that 61 percent of employees are aware of abusive conduct at work, 19 percent have experienced it, and another 19 percent have witnessed it. As the Workplace Bullying Institute explains, workplace bullying is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of individuals. It is abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, or intimidating. It can also entail interfering with or sabotaging work. What's more, workplace bullying is not defined by mere rudeness or incivility. Rather, it's abusive behavior that is repetitive, long-lasting and occurs with increasing intensity. It also usually entails power differences, most frequently between a manager and a direct report – 72 percent of bullies outrank their targets. But if you think you know workplace bullying when you see it, then you often won't see it. Most workplace bullies are not caricatures of maniacal bosses who hurl insults and throw cellphones at colleagues. Aggressive acts usually are not physical, nor are they likely to be face to face. Many adults are far too sophisticated to engage in the sandbox behaviors of their grade-school counterparts. That makes bullies hard to detect, even more so because they tend to leverage organizational tools to inflict harm – taking undue credit for work, assigning too much (often unnecessary) work, constantly changing and setting unreasonable deadlines, creating impractical demands, giving overly critical performance reviews, threatening to fire or discipline, and the list goes on. If you can imagine it, a bully has done it. (Never mind that studies show that 11 percent of bullies display similar behavior with clients.) Often, though, it's what bullies *don't* do that constitutes some of the worst acts of hostility, such as not sharing important information, withholding resources, limiting access to opportunities,

stripping job responsibilities, excluding someone from meetings, and holding back promotions or praise.

Deep Impact

Targets of bullying will usually wonder: Is this person really looking to harm me? Will I look like a crazed, difficult employee if I complain? Will HR roll their eyes? As a result, 29 percent of victims never report their experiences – perhaps because 71 percent of employers react to allegations in ways that end up harming targets even further (which includes overlooking, enabling, or even supporting retaliation). All of which can sap victims of their confidence and their ability to work effectively. Yes, workplace bullying is wrong because it hurts people. But it also hurts your bottom line due to lost morale, motivation, engagement, and productivity, as well as increased medical costs, absenteeism, and turnover. Targets are also more likely to cover up mistakes, of which there will be more given the stress victims are under. No surprise, then, that many victims quit their jobs to stop the bullying – while bullies may not get more than a slap on the wrist. The ratio of negative consequences experienced by targets compared with perpetrators is 7:1.

Bad Apples or Bad Policy?

The common logic around workplace bullies is that they are insecure, so they lash out at others to shift attention away from their deficiencies. Except, this doesn't explain why all employees with insecurities (and really, isn't that all of us) don't lash out at work. The reality is that people engage in bullying for more reasons than a blog post can delve into, but there's only one reason bullying occurs at any company: because the company allows it. To address bullying, it's not enough to throw out the bad apples. You've got to create an environment that keeps people from growing rotten in the first place. That's not a trite statement, because here's a secret: Many bullies don't perceive themselves as bullies. In fact, it's just the opposite. They sometimes act with good intentions. (People like Ted, in our earlier story, maybe.) The road to catastrophe is paved with managers who may not be aware that their behaviors are harmful. Some may not recognize that their behavior is aggressive, while others may confuse aggression for good management. That's why setting proper expectations are so important.

Banishing Bullying

Here's what you can do to help identify and prevent bullying at your organization:

- **Survey your people.** But don't ask them if they've experienced or witnessed bullying (as that can also lead the witness). People hold different definitions of the concept. Instead, query them about specific behaviors to help uncover what's going on in your organization.
- **Create a policy.** Set clear expectations, define intolerable behaviors, and provide clear examples to drive home that you won't accept the mistreatment of your people.

- **Conduct training.** Educate managers and employees on a regular basis about the nature of workplace bullying. Also, make sure to include bystander training, so when people see something, they say something.
- **Implement reporting and investigation procedures.** Speaking of saying something, make sure that you enable your employees to use multiple channels to raise concerns – and then have a process in place to handle allegations.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Make sure you inform employees using multimedia on a continuous basis about expectations to create a respectful climate.

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